

DEDICATION TO JESSICA MAE OROZCO

Volume 66 of *Madroño* is dedicated to Jessica Mae Orozco, a skilled field biologist and passionate ethnobotanist with a commitment to preserve Native American botanical knowledge (Fig. 1). In a tragically short amount of time, she was able to accomplish so much and make a lasting impression on the botanical community before her life was cut short, when she was shot and killed on October 27, 2018, at the age of 31.

She was born in Sacramento, CA, where she attended and worked as a Teaching Assistant at American River College. In 2010, she transferred to San Francisco State University (SFSU), where she earned a B.S. in Botany with a minor in American Indian Studies. At SFSU, Jessica was present in mind and body in every class and on every field trip. She always maintained a positive attitude with an infectious enthusiasm. She was a favorite of everyone. No hurdle was too high for her, no climb too difficult, and as she accomplished more, she would celebrate with a smile and a laugh



FIG. 1. Jessica proudly demonstrating a *Nolina* inflorescence. Her love of plants was effusive and one of her greatest joys was sharing her knowledge of plants with others. Photo Credit: Jessica Orozco Facebook Page.

If you knew Jessica, or if you follow her on Facebook, Instagram (@plantsnotpantz), or read her blog (<https://jessicaorozco.wordpress.com>), you will often read the phrase “PLANTS NOT PANTS!!” Jessica coined this cheer while on a field trip while taking Plant Taxonomy at SFSU. While visiting the southern desert over spring break, the phrase stemmed from a plant keying session in a large tent on a cold night. It quickly became a class motto. Jessica was the 2012 academic hood nominee for the SFSU Biology Department and gave a moving speech at the biology graduation ceremony. Being the spirited botanist that she had become, she ended her speech with a triumphant, “Plants not Pants!” followed by cheers from the fellow botany students in the crowd.

As an undergraduate, Jessica participated in two National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) programs, both studying plant biology: one at the Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research at Cornell University (Summer 2010), and the other at Blandy Experimental Farm in Boyce, Virginia (Summer 2011) (Fig. 2). During her time at SFSU, she also worked with student groups doing indigenous plant restoration at Indian Canyon - one of her favorite places in all of California. Prior to beginning graduate studies, she spent time at the UC Berkeley Jepson Herbarium, learning research techniques. Even during her undergraduate education, Jessica was already making meaningful connections with botanists and members of native communities across California and the country.

She went on to earn her Master’s degree in Botany from Claremont Graduate University at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden (RSABG), during which time she was awarded a Ford Foundation Fellowship. Jessica’s M.S. thesis was a floristic study of the South Fork of the Tule



FIG. 2. Jessica working in the lab during her REU program at the Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research at Cornell University. Photo: Jessica Orozco’s Facebook Page.

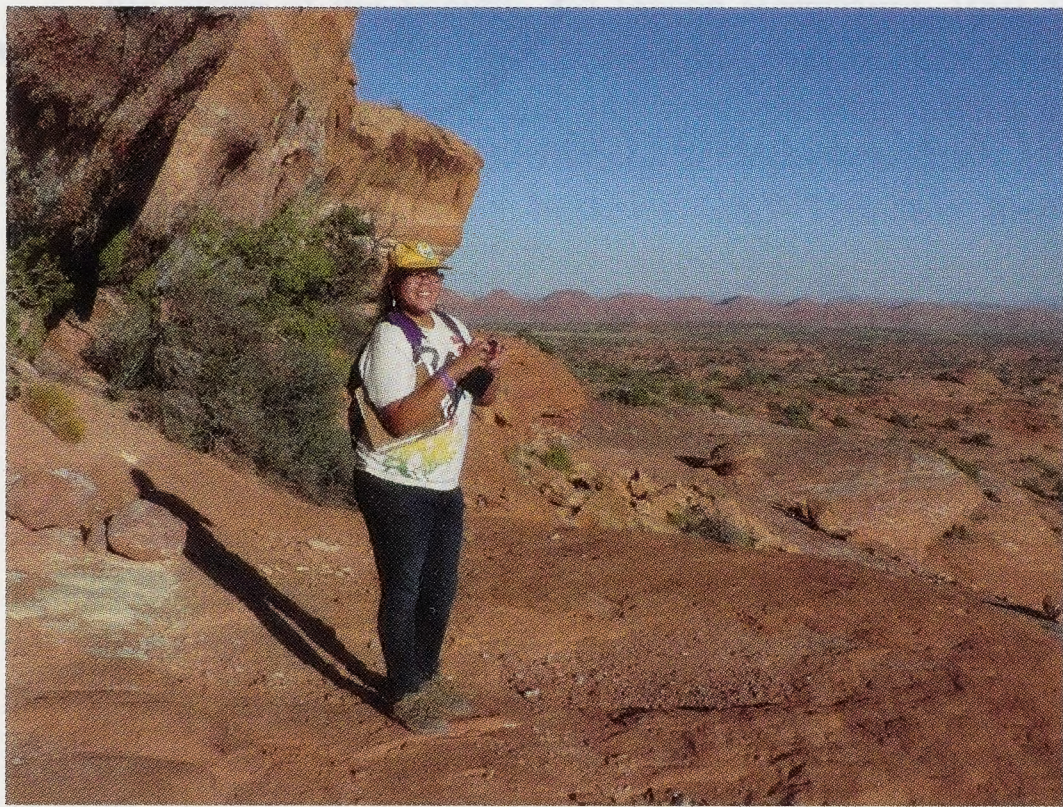


FIG. 3. Jessica Orozco at the “Twist” in southeastern Utah, September 2014 during her studies with Arnold Clifford. He recalled how happy she was this day, knowing she was in the region where Alice Eastwood collected plant specimens in the 1890’s. Photo Credit: Arnold Clifford.

River in the southern Sierra Nevada, the eastern half of which is within the Tule River Indian Reservation. Under the guidance of RSABG’s Dr. J. Travis Columbus, she worked with the people of the Tule River Indian Reservation to get permission to botanically survey the land and provide the tribe with the data she collected about the plants on the Tule River. In 2014, Jessica contacted renowned Navajo botanist Arnold Clifford in an attempt to reconnect with her Navajo roots. In June, she left with Arnold Clifford on a 12-week crash course in the Four Corners Region, studying plants, conducting botanical surveys, and going on a journey to learn about her Navajo culture (Fig. 3). This trip truly changed Jessica’s life. Jessica excelled at bridging the gaps between indigenous knowledge of plants and their uses, and western approaches to botanical collection and plant identification, in order to learn from others, and then using that information to teach people about the plants around them with great enthusiasm and passion.

During her time at RSABG, she was a council member for the California Botanical Society. She organized the 2015 California Botanical Society Graduate Student Symposium and Annual Banquet at RSABG, a symposium that brings together students studying botany in western North America to present their research. During the symposium, she inspired the idea to start the Botany Ambassador Program, in which graduate students can participate in botanical outreach for K–12 youth a program which continues to grow and develop today.

It was also during her graduate study that, amidst great personal hardships, Jessica decided to become the legal guardian to her nephew James (Fig. 4). When the time came for James to need a parent, overnight Jessica became an amazing, committed single mom and had been his legal guardian since 2015. She referred to James as her “heart” and would often take him along on botanical trips. She would teach him about the plants and insects they would see, earning her the nickname “Auntie Bug”.



FIG. 4. Jessica and her beloved nephew, James Kitchens, at a wedding, displaying her botanical tattoos (left). Jessica and James on a trip to the Grand Canyon after they moved to Arizona to pursue her career as a range specialist (right). Photo: Jessica Orozco.

Upon graduating, Jessica found her dream job as a Range Scientist with the Hualapai Nation Natural Resources Department in Peach Springs, Arizona. Jessica and James found their home within the Hualapai community, and Jessica was so excited to establish roots there and watch them grow. She worked with the 4H program as part of her job in the Natural Resources Department, and was able to share her knowledge of the plants and animals with the Hualapai youth a task she greatly enjoyed. She took her prior experiences learning desert ecology from Arnold Clifford in the Four Corners and doing surveys on the Colorado River to develop her knowledge and appreciation of southwestern desert flora. She had a continued interest from work in her graduate studies on the effect of ethnobotanical uses on the population genetics of chia (*Salvia columbariae* Benth.) along historical trade routes. At the time of her death, Jessica was still working on some of this work. From her amazing accomplishments over such a short career, there is no doubt she would have continued to make a huge impact on indigenous and botanical communities alike.

Jessica Orozco was a proud Native woman who was able to take all of the anguish and pain of the past, and transform it into a beautiful life, where she fought for the rights of the indigenous and refused to submit to the lasting effects of colonization. No matter how much time anyone spent with Jessica, she always left a positive impression. Her bright and bubbly nature could fill any room with laughter and smiles. She was a beacon of positive energy, and had been practicing Buddhism, where she was able to foster that incredible amount of energy and share it with others. Jessica was funny, unique, and sported a diverse collection of botanical tattoos including *Salvia columbariae*, *Hesperocallis undulata* A.Gray, *Limonium californicum* (Boiss.) A.Heller, *Lilium kellyanum* Lemmon (Fig. 5). Jessica had an unprecedented love and understanding of the Earth and all of its plants. As a botanist, she trudged through paths less

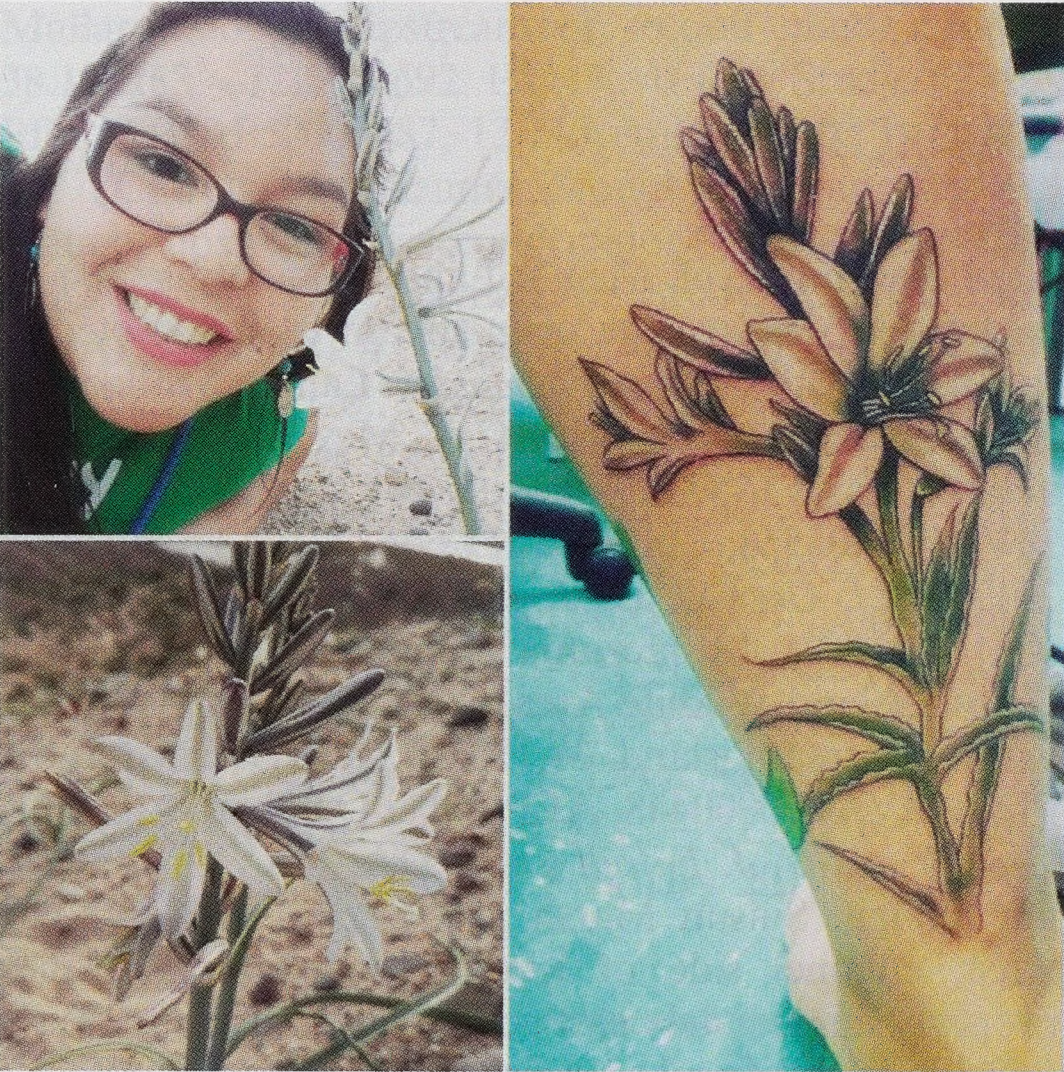


FIG. 5. Jessica Orozco had several botanical tattoos. She got this desert lily (*Hesperocallis undulata*) tattoo to commemorate her first year of living in Arizona, studying desert plants, and working with the Hualapai Nation Natural Resources Department. Photo: Jessica Orozco’s Facebook Page.

traveled in order to shine light on plants that would have otherwise been overlooked. Her death is a truly a loss to the field of botany and anyone that had the privilege of knowing her. Through her studies, work, and adventures, Jessica encountered many people, and touched so many lives.

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